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## Civil Religion and the Patriotic Church: Wielding the "Power of Pride" in Times of War

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**Civil Religion and the Patriotic Church:  
Wielding the “Power of Pride” in Times of War**

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Senior Sociology Seminar

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***Wielding the “Power of Pride” In Times of War***

**Table of Contents**

<i>Introduction</i>	2
<i>Sociological Framework</i>	5
<i>Historical Framework</i>	11
<i>The Patriotic Church</i>	15
<i>Conclusion</i>	26
<i>Appendix A: Images of the Patriotic Church</i>	28
<i>Appendix B: Church Rhetoric</i>	34
<i>References</i>	38
<i>Literature Review</i>	42

**Abstract**

The sociological concept of “civil religion” has been widely studied and debated within social science circles since the release of Robert Bellah’s article, “Civil Religion in America” in 1967. However, this idea of nations using religious figures, rhetoric, and symbols as cohesive and mobilizing forces is certainly not new. Throughout the history of the United States—from the American Revolution to the current war in Iraq—civil religion has been one of the primary forces drawing people together for a common cause. Concurrent to the nation-state’s utilization of religious symbols, the church employs the use of national symbols. This dialectic relationship between civil religion and the patriotic church is amplified during times of conflict. Examining these powerful relationships during such a time through sociological, historical, and theological frameworks is valuable for anyone seeking to wield the power of the church/state fusion wisely.

## **Civil Religion and the Patriotic Church:**

### ***Wielding the “Power of Pride” In Times of War***

#### **Introduction**

The already heavy summer air carried the extra weight of growing anticipation on this particular July evening. The families gathering in the large, barn-like sanctuary had clearly been looking forward to this event all summer. It was camp meeting time, and everyone came with an excitement to see the Holy Spirit move—to be filled with the excitement of community, music, and spiritual experience. As the energetic young evangelist hopped up onto the podium and invited everyone to stand, I could not help but notice immediately the colorful American flag waving on his tie. I took note of this and bowed my head for the opening prayer, neglecting to observe that he was placing his hand on his heart and turning to the right. He explained that it seemed appropriate to him to begin the camp meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance. In wholehearted agreement, the entire congregation, young and old, joined him in the pledge—placing particular emphasis on “under God.” Immediately following this activity, the pianist struck up the National Anthem and the people sang along enthusiastically.

This scenario did not come as a surprise to me. After all, spending the summer of 2002 traveling around to different churches and camps had afforded many opportunities to witness similar showings of patriotic fervor. In a different part of the country, we enjoyed a lengthy hymn-sing with the congregation following a concert. People clearly enjoyed singing through songs in the hymnal, but one song in particular elicited a much more emotional response. One man requested “O Beautiful, for Spacious Skies,” and the

tears and sighs that accompanied this number revealed a different level of solemnity and emotional attachment for many present. I also think of a church (in yet another state) proudly displaying “In God We Trust” and “God Bless America” banners across the front of the sanctuary. In still another church, star-spangled bumper stickers reading “Power of Pride” were displayed and available for the taking at the front of the church.

Interestingly, I had visited the “Pledge of Allegiance” camp meeting and the “God Bless America” banner church the previous summer, and recall none of these outward symbols of national pride. While it is likely that these churches have always had a degree of patriotism, what caused the drastic increase in the use of national symbols from the summer of 2001 to the summer of 2002? How and why did patriotism become an essential part of life for Christians in the U.S.?

Throughout the history of the United States, religion has been a primary force drawing people together behind a common national cause. Concurrent to the nation-state’s utilization of religious symbols, the church employs the use of national symbols. This dialectic relationship between civil religion and the patriotic church is amplified during times of conflict. In current conflicts (both the War on Terror and the War in Iraq), both sides of the relationship have transcended the traditional boundaries as the Bush administration uses explicitly Christian terms (Yourish 2003:28) and the church embraces patriotism at an unprecedented level, with Christians who attend church once a week or more being some of the most ardent supporters of military action (Minnesota Public Radio 2003 and Gallup 2003).

The tools of sociology, history, and theology all help to better understand these dynamics. Exploring traditional sociological explanations of religion and civil religion,

touring historical examples, and dissecting the nature of religious and national symbols in today's society and church will aid in illuminating the church's embrace of patriotism. While this paper will discuss the elements of civil religion to provide a framework, its primary focus will be the "patriotic church," as it seems most pressing at this time that Christians carefully examine the ramifications of this powerful embrace.

## **Sociological Framework**

To better understand theories of civil religion—the societal embrace of religious symbols—it is essential to understand the ideas of Emile Durkheim, Robert Bellah, Martin Marty, Robert Wuthnow, Stephen Carter, and Donald Kraybill.

Perhaps it is best to begin with sociologist Emile Durkheim, who in 1899 offered one of the first viable sociological definitions of “religion”: “phenomena held to be religious consist in obligatory beliefs, connected with clearly defined practices which are related to given objects of those beliefs” (93). Corollary to his definition is “the fact that religion originates not in individual feelings but in collective states of mind” (93-94). Durkheim’s emphasis on collectivity is an important foundation for civil religion, which only functions in the context of the society at large. His functionalist standpoint also undergirds civil religion, since it is best understood as a structure that functions to unify and give significance to the society.

Nearly every contemporary discussion of civil religion has its genesis with sociologist Robert Bellah, famous for his 1967 article, “Civil Religion in America.” Echoing Durkheimian ideas of collectivity and functionalism, he explains initially that “every community is based on a sense of the sacred and requires a context of higher meaning” (1973:270). In the case of the nation-state, this does not usually mean a specific religion, but a generalized religion alongside of, but clearly separate from, churches—this he calls the “elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America” (1967:21). Like any religion, civil religion has its own prophets, symbols, and rituals, and “requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does” (1967:21).

Bellah explains that Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, described the set of beliefs generally embraced by the state—including belief in the existence of God and general principles of morality. To describe this he originally coined the phrase “civil religion” (1967:26). While the words “civil religion” are not in the explicit vocabulary of the American founding fathers, Bellah believes that the same principles were employed in the actions of the early statesmen, and have continued to be employed throughout American history.

One contemporary political scientist recently affirmed that civil religion remains alive and well, at least as a rhetorical tool, saying, “Perhaps no term [referring to “civil religion”] has linked the American presidency and religion more . . .” (Walz 2001:197). While it is true that this rhetoric has been employed by every president from Washington on, Bellah is quick to point out that the rhetoric of civil religion in its pure form remains as “symbolically open or empty as possible” (1973:258). In other words, it does not use any over specific or exclusive symbols. This is a particularly important distinction, especially in an increasingly pluralistic society. While civil religion in the U.S. implies Judeo-Christian foundations, it nowhere clearly embraces Christianity. For example, the unofficial U.S. motto, “God bless America,” is very general—with no specific Christocentric or biblical allusions.

Donald Kraybill (2003) offers one illustration for Bellah’s description of civil religion or church/state dynamics generally. He draws a circle in which the bottom half is the legal church/state division, deeply rooted and fairly clear. The top half is the cultural manifestation, fuzzy and ambiguous. It is here that the marriage between religion and politics takes place as they exchange symbols, rhetoric, and priests.



Sociologist and historian Martin Marty, one of America's leading scholars in the area of civil religion, offers two particularly helpful distinctions to the civil religion discussion. First, he suggests that civil religion, which is symbolically empty, can sometimes cross over into more of a "public theology," in which politicians share more of an exclusive theology in their public life. Bellah explains that this theology speaks "from particular religious traditions to the national need" (1973: 258).

Second, Marty explains that civil religion has both a "priestly" role, and a "prophetic" role. He describes the priestly role as "celebrative, affirmative, culture-building," and the prophetic as having "a disposition toward the judgmental" (1974:145). A banner in a local pastor's lawn puts this paradigm into different terms. It reads "America, bless God." This clever take-off of the increasingly popular refrain "God bless America" highlights the dialectic Marty describes. "God bless America" demonstrates the priestly role of civil religion—the celebration that America has a special role and place in the world, specifically chosen by God and blessed by him. However, the admonishment "America, bless God," illustrates the prophetic role, espoused by those who call America as a nation to certain actions so that God will be pleased.

One illustration of both public theology and prophetic civil religion is found in lyrics from a popular Christian artist, Carman:

But something happened since Jefferson called the Bible the cornerstone for American  
liberty then put it in our schools as a light.  
Or since "Give me liberty or give me death", Patrick Henry said our country was founded  
on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.  
We eliminated God from the equation of American life, thus eliminating the reason this  
nation first began.  
From beyond the grave I hear the voices of our founding fathers plead, you need God in  
America again

The only hope for America is Jesus, the only hope for our country is Him.  
If we repent of our ways, stand firm and say,

We need God in America again (1991—see Appendix B for complete lyrics).

First of all, it is historically debatable that Jefferson and Henry's actions and words were exactly as Carman describes. But that aside, it is an appropriate example of (1) speaking to America from a particular theology and (2) encouraging the country to return to God.

Robert Wuthnow, one of the leading sociologists in the world in the area of religion, has also made significant contributions to the sociological study of civil religion. While he tends to view American society as much more secularized than either Durkheim or Bellah, he certainly cites civil religion as a part of America's legitimizing process. His discussion of the two sides of legitimation is similar to Marty's "priestly" and "prophetic" distinction. Legitimation can either quiet dissent by encouraging acceptance and loyalty to the nation or can spark questions to correct the national direction (1988:243).

Wuthnow goes on to argue that civil religion is divided much more deeply along conservative and liberal theologies. Conservative civil religion tends to focus on the American "myth of origin" (244)—as demonstrated in the Carman song above. It tends to describe America's responsibility to the world in terms of its "chosen-ness" and its obligation to evangelize ("bring freedom to") the world. More liberal civil religion focuses on humanitarian concerns, where America participates in world affairs because it is part of the community and has contributed to its problems. Most evangelical Christians in this time of conflict tend to fall into the "conservative civil religion" category, while humanist civil religionists dominate the liberal category. I would like to pause briefly here to mention the growing gap in ideology between "most evangelical

Christians” and the leadership of most Christian denominations (this will be discussed further in the theological section on pages 24-25).

One other important consideration in the study of civil religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious fabric of the nation. As in any area within the study of religion, it is essential to understand the values, symbols, and assigned meanings of the culture in which it is practiced. The country’s civil religion is changing as the plethora of religious traditions requires a focus on more general characteristics of God and spirituality. Wuthnow calls this “complicated boundary work” or “negotiation of identity” (1997:251). In other words, citizens and politicians must now work even harder to find their identity through many different and sometimes-conflicting communities—whether school, ethnic group, religious tradition, or national identity.

Ironically, at the same time that the need for generalized civil religion is growing due to the multicultural emphasis, the current Administration happens to be one of the most evangelical in recent history (Ritsch 2003 and Carver 2003). Tension and isolation have developed over comments such as President Bush’s exclusive answer in a press conference that only those who follow Jesus Christ will go to heaven. In this time of tension, when civil religion is crucial for politicians, it is fascinating to watch the change, negotiation, and impression management that occur through attempting to be more inclusive while holding to an exclusive theology.

Stephen Carter puts a different spin on the religious results of multiculturalism. Ten years ago he contended that true religious witness began to lose its voice in the public square. Religion is now more of a “hobby” (1993:54), used by politicians (i.e., civil religion). Thus, at the very time that all of these rich and diverse voices could come

into meaningful public conversation, the true religious voices are not being heard (57). He argues that this is primarily due to abortion and the assumption that any public religious voice today only comes from the conservative end (58).

While looking into definitions and examples of civil religion and religious rhetoric can certainly lead to cynicism, sociologists from Bellah to Kraybill have cautioned against lopsided criticism of the more negative perversions of civil religion. While Bellah confesses that civil religion is often used to cover “petty interests and ugly passions” (1967:41), he also points out that it can function in positive ways. For example, both civil religion and Marty’s “public theology” were instrumental in the Civil Rights movement. When a plausibility structure can be fortified with the belief that, for example, all people must be treated justly, this can lead to tremendous good.

Kraybill (2003) uses the examples of Abraham Lincoln and Jimmy Carter to demonstrate “good” civil religion. Abraham Lincoln, in his second Inaugural address, did not claim that God was on a particular side during the Civil war, but called for healing of the nation, reminding the people of God’s righteousness and judgment (Carver 2003 and Bellah 1967). In a similar fashion, Jimmy Carter, in his inaugural address, used Micah 6:8 to talk about his responsibility to seeking humility and mercy. He used the general references of pure civil religion to unify and not isolate (Carter 1977).

Kraybill describes the negative aspects of civil religion as those that sacralize the national identity or legitimate ethnocentrism or militarism. One example of this would be Ronald Reagan using one of Jesus’ parables (Luke 14:31—in which he refers to a king “counting the cost” for battle) to legitimate his military budget (Weinraub 1985:1).

## Historical Framework

Unfortunately, not all examples of civil religion show humility. Civil religion is most present and pertinent in times of war. As one historian put it, “. . . religion keeps tumbling back in on us, especially in wartime” (Wills 2003:5). To mobilize the masses to military action, it seems required to carry a certain degree of arrogance that God is on “our” side and that victory is certain. Following are some examples of civil religion (not necessarily public theology or patriotic Christianity) coming to the fore in times of national conflict.

The American Revolution is one of the first examples of elevated civil religion on this continent in time of war. During the 1770s, Thomas Paine took full advantage of religious rhetoric to stir the colonists to action. For example, he reasons, “Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America, is a strong and natural proof, that the authority of the one, over the other, was never the design of Heaven. . . . The reformation was preceded by the discovery of America, as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years . . .” (1776:87). Samuel Adams agrees, “The hand of Heaven seems to have directed every occurrence” (qtd. in Albanese 1976: 83). This ability to discern the design or hand of Heaven is an ability of America’s leaders that seems to increase during times of conflict.

Paine also seemed to capture the spirit of the times, which one historian describes as “pulled between the conflicting poles of biblical religion and secular rationalism” (McWilliams 1987:448). The Constitutional framers decided on “a secular regime aided by civil religion, aiming to discipline religion for the service of political society”

(McWilliams 1987:451). The precedent of “disciplining religion” for political use has continued through American history.

During the Civil War, both sides laid claim to the civil religion invoking the primarily Christian God. One of the most lasting symbols of civil religion during this time is “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (see Appendix B for complete lyrics). Penned by Julia Ward Howe in 1861, it is one of the most recognized tunes in America, appearing in churches, civil rights rallies, concert halls, and patriotic medleys. Originally written to protest slavery and proclaim God’s displeasure with it, its meaning has transcended the limits of that specific time and scenario. One editor commenting on “The Battle Hymn” states, “Its message is one of millennial faith and optimistic conviction that God has chosen the *United States* of America to lead the way to the redemption of the world” (McLoughlin 1986:28).

While many today tend to think of the North invoking God’s power to fight against slavery, the Confederate armies also used religion to mobilize and legitimate. For example, *The Journal of Military History* quotes several who emphasized the importance of religion: “He had ‘not the slightest doubt . . . that the most powerful agent’ sustaining Southern morale was the church” (Watson 1994:29). Watson also describes religion as “a means of consolation, a shield against fear and loss” (55). These are all certainly common functions of religion as a social structure.

Moving ahead one century, the Cold War provides an avid example of civil religion blossoming in conflict. Almost all rhetoric during this time painted a picture of the godless Communists pitted against godly freedom. It was an essential unifying factor

for President Dwight Eisenhower and his administration as they sought to garner and maintain public support.

There is little doubt that religion was an integral part of the Eisenhower Presidency. It is frequently heralded a time of "piety along the Potomac," which "included Bible breakfasts, congressional prayer groups, and a president named Eisenhower who made numerous religious allusions in his speeches . . ." "In God We Trust" was added to stamps and money, and "under God" was added to the "one nation" in the Pledge of Allegiance (Johnstone 2001:274). As a result, some have given Eisenhower the title of "most religious" president in history (Gustafson 1969:610). Dwight agreed that he made a religious contribution, insisting, "I'm the most intensely religious man I know" (Hutchinson 1954:154).

Eisenhower's final resting place in Abilene, Kansas, is a symbol of his commitment to civil religion in its pure form. While the church-like architecture in every way implies Christianity through its stained-glass windows, pews and altar, there is no specific Christian symbolism anywhere. Crosses, Bibles, hymnals, and Scripture are completely absent. It leads people into quiet reflection of the supernatural without explicit instructions on beliefs. No one is isolated; all are united in this building. This captures the public religion of the Eisenhower presidency, without crossing into public theology or patriotic Christianity.

One place in Eisenhower's life where civil religion crossed into patriotic Christianity came through his relationship with his pastor in Washington, DC, who later wrote a book on his spirituality. Reverend Edward Elson, Dwight's pastor during the time he and Mamie attended the National Presbyterian Church in, stated, "It may turn out

in the long run of history that the exemplary practice of his Christian faith was Eisenhower's most enduring contribution to his times" (1986:132). This demonstrates that while Eisenhower is taking hold of pieces of religion, the church is also embracing Eisenhower.

According to Bellah, early American statesmen like Franklin, Washington, and Jefferson, did not treat civil religion as a substitute for Christianity (1967: 29). The church, indeed Christianity in general, had its own place completely separate from the symbols and rituals of civil religion. At least, this was the ideal. Perhaps in the days of the founding fathers, and even of Bellah, it was easier to draw a line between civil religion and Christianity. But history shows that church and state have a magnetic force drawing them together. Today such a line certainly no longer exists. Bellah argued, for example, that while no president has failed to mention God in his inaugural address, references to Christ are almost non-existent. This is no longer the case. At the same time that President Bush draws upon increasingly explicit Christian imagery, the church embraces ever more freely the symbols of national devotion.

Traces of each of the aforementioned historical examples of civil religion have resurfaced in recent months. The difference now is an elevated patriotic Christianity (such as in the case of Elson and Eisenhower) as well. There are certainly more billboards reading "God Bless America" and more songs like "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in society—signs of civil religion. However, churches are also producing many more "Support U.S. Troops" signs, and Christian artists are writing and singing national songs with increasing frequency.



## The Patriotic Church

Boundaries are being crossed today in unprecedented ways. At the same time that President Bush draws upon increasingly explicit Christian imagery, the church embraces ever more freely the symbols of national devotion. This is happening to the degree that it is often difficult to distinguish between the two institutions.

Like Bellah, and Durkheim before him, I cannot help but approach this from a functionalist perspective. In the case of civil religion, religion functions as a cohesive device for a nation-state, especially in times of conflict when that additional cohesion is required. In the vast majority of churches in the United States today, there are several very powerful phenomena at work. Flowing rhetoric, music with the ability to stir emotions, and firm group cohesion (to name only a few attributes) have always combined to create a commanding force in religious situations. With such power, it is no surprise that politicians are, and always have been, trying to woo clergy. In this time of war, we see the powerful phenomena mentioned above turning often to nationalistic symbols. To examine this more carefully, it is insightful to examine rhetoric from lay people and clergy, music (with and without lyrics), and group dynamics.

Conversely, on the “patriotic church” side of the dialectic, national symbols are functional for the church by giving an opportunity for power within the governmental structures and by giving spiritual and emotional direction. For example, Elson, by embracing Eisenhower, was thrust into the public sphere, gaining power and opportunity. It was functional for him to bring Ike’s civil religion into the church. Kraybill’s chapter in *Our Star-Spangled Faith* entitled “Priests as Presidents,” explains further this dialectic between civil religion and the church: “The Civil Religion affair could not make it as a

good romance if Presidents only wooed clerics. Preachers, priests, and rabbis must respond—they must embrace politicians” (1976: 63). Understanding this embrace requires a look into the church’s striving after power and into Christian theology.

To begin the discussion of rhetoric in the church, literature points us to Mark Twain, who, after witnessing a pre-emptive war over a century ago, wrote the “War Prayer:”

"Oh Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; ...help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land.... We ask it, in the sprit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love" (Wills 2003).

While this is meant to be satirical, at one Central Pennsylvania church, I recently received a bulletin insert frighteningly close to these ideas. Part of an apparently widely circulated e-mail, it read:

We can do something about the threat of war; both in Iraq and with terrorists. In the Old Testament, God’s armies were always led by the priests. When the waters parted in the Jordan, it was the priests’ feet which first hit the turbulent river. In the New Testament, Christians are also referred to as priests . . . all Christians. We must, therefore, go in first. As the possibility of war approaches with Hussein and Iraq, we are asking the priests to step in first . . . ahead of our military. Let us be setting up camp for our soldiers’ entrance into the conflict. . . . Let us be sending in “prayer missiles,” “cruise and scud prayers” to target enemy plans. “Patriot prayers” to shoot down incoming threats (see Appendix B for complete quotation).

Lest anyone think this is a minority view carelessly circulated over the Internet, I also quote R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President of Southern Baptist (the largest U.S. Protestant denomination) Theological Seminary:

For all of us, this is a call to prayer. We must pray for the safety and success of our brave men and women in uniform. . . . The President’s doctrine of preemptive military action makes moral sense in this post-9/11 world, and his moral vision reminds us of other presidents tested by war. . . . Let us pray for that this military campaign will be a victory for world peace [sic] (2003).

First of all, the rhetoric in all of these quotes invokes God to aid in military victory. The theology of this idea will be discussed in more depth later. Of interest now is how this assumption and the second and third excerpts draw a distinct correlation between God's army and "our" military. In the United States it is common to hear people claim ownership of the military—"our boys" or "our men and women in uniform." Indeed, it is an essential part of the national bonding that is highly functional in times of conflict. Here the church joins with this sentiment. Not only is the military "ours," but ultimately, God's. Claiming part in this ownership and entering the narrative of the Old Testament armies and priests give the church a sense of belonging to God in a special way as well.

These comments also illustrate the embrace and "Christianization" of military language—in fact, uniquely U.S. military language (i.e. "Patriot prayers"). The use of the word "priests" would be especially interesting to Marty, since he long ago suggested the paradigm of "priestly" civil religion—the belief in the Heaven-blessed leaders of this Heaven-blessed land. The clear implication with the use of the word "priest" is that the U.S. church, along with "our" military, are chosen of God. One other word used to provide religious legitimation for the President from within the church is "doctrine." Bulletin inserts and meditations like this bring ideas of civil religion into the church through rhetoric.

While this is not necessarily from within the church, no example illustrates the power of religious rhetoric quite like Bush's use of the word "crusade" following the September 11 attacks. This explosive word rang throughout the rest of the world, which has a much longer historical memory of the meaning of that word in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It

took much political maneuvering to cover that mistake and erase it permanently from the vocabulary of the Bush administration. The more recent “power word” is “evil.” He has drawn clear moral lines, justifying anything in the name of “destroying evil” (Fineman 2003:30). Indeed, the word rings with power within the church too—everyone wants to fight against evil.

While words have extraordinary power, they cannot often independently penetrate the soul and mobilize the masses as effectively as music. Music has been the impetus behind major political movements from ancient Israel to 20<sup>th</sup> century South America. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon clearly knew the power of music in persuading the masses. The Old Testament describes that when he gathered all the people of his province together, he played elaborate music to communicate when they were to bow and worship the image he created. While the threat of being thrown into a furnace was incentive enough to obey, the detailed description of the music at the time they were to worship leads the reader to believe that it was a significant influence in this mass social movement (1989:810-811).

The association of “music” and “worship” within the church gives it even greater force. Thus, when the music in a Christian setting is patriotic, it is easily associated with “worship” also. For example, in October of 2002 Bill and Gloria Gaither (two famous Christian gospel artists) offered their “most electric Homecoming experience ever” when they presented “Let Freedom Ring” and “God Bless America,” “two new projects filled with worship, patriotism and tribute” (Parable 2002). Undeniably, the amount of patriotic religious music filling the sound waves has increased since September 11, 2001. Not only are these songs more commonly requested at hymn-sings (as I found this

summer), but the Christian music industry has taken hold of them as well. Avalon, Sandy Patti, Michael W. Smith, the Gaithers, and numerous gospel groups have all given concerts or renditions with patriotic themes. Even “Praise Hymn Soundtracks,” which sounds explicitly worship-centered, include patriotic songs. Finally, lest anyone think that this wave is only for the more contemporary, I point to St. John’s Episcopal Church in Pennsylvania, which has added the fourth verse of “America” to their weekly liturgy since the fall of 2001.

Patriotic songs need not even have lyrics. Michael W. Smith, world-famous Christian recording artist, produced an instrumental piece entitled “Freedom,” which is centered on the ideas of fighting for freedom during the civil war. The soldier at the center of the song’s composition had endured the bloody battle to return home. Says the composer, “He had paid a bitter price for our freedom” (Smith 2002:13). Music is one of the most powerful unifying phenomena within religion. This piece demonstrates the power of musical chord structure and instrumentation. The snare drum undergirding the piece is a constant reminder of the battle going on. At the climax of the piece, the listener is able to envision him or herself at the glorious hero of a movie, with the strong French horn line soaring in harmony with a liberated pan flute. Of course, for those with a less critical musical ear, patriotic quotations from George W. Bush and Reverend Billy Graham have been added to one version of the song.

Music can be powerful in any situation—whether you are listening to Michael W. Smith or Carman in the comfort of your own home or singing “America” liturgically. However, the power increases when a collective dynamic enters. Durkheim describes this collective element, using the term “collective effervescence” (Ritzer 2000:200):

The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation. . . . The initial impulse is thereby amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche that grows as it goes along. . . . Probably because a collective emotion cannot be expressed collectively without some order that permits harmony and unison of movement, these gestures and cries tend to fall into rhythm and regularity, and from there into songs and dances (Durkheim 1912:217-218).

War correspondent Chris Hedges describes this as “collective insanity,” and he has observed it in other cultures and other places. For example, he reflects that one morning he woke up and thought that New Yorkers were Serbs with the kind of “self-exultation, the denigration of our enemies . . . the poison” he observed (MPR 2003). He seems to describe what social psychology refers to as “anonymity”—a phenomenon in group situations when people feel at ease to act as they never would alone because no one will distinguish them from anyone else.

When we contemplate pouring the force of this collective frenzy behind a social activity, clearly it could be a cause for great concern. It is comparable to sitting atop a rocket: if the rocket has direction and purpose, it can be a wonderful and useful tool. If its direction is not carefully thought-out, injuring persons or property is a distinct possibility.

To attempt to understand the church’s willingness to throw their power into today’s national causes, it is necessary to turn to some of the functions of patriotism in the church. Among the primary functions of religion generally are cognitive dissonance resolution and anxiety absorption. Today, embracing national and military ideals in the church can significantly assuage spiritual anxiety. Many know men and women involved in the conflict, and there is too much cognitive dissonance caused by allowing oneself to think that their actions are immoral or unjust. This is especially true during this time

because Evangelical Christians are such avid supporters of President Bush (82% say he is doing an “excellent job”), who is using such explicitly Christian rhetoric to garner support (Barna 2003).

The desire for comfort can be seen in at least one popular Christian book for sale from J. Countryman that is a “collection of Scripture verses selected especially for patriots of the United States” (2003). This particular volume has indexed Scriptures “to set your mind and heart at ease.” Further, Christians everywhere are affirmed that they are contributing to society because, “For every *God's Promises: Spirit of America* that is purchased, J. Countryman will send a copy to a soldier overseas. This goodwill gesture has come at a time when our country has a renewed patriotic heart” (2003).

Examining the Christian theology that encourages such patriotism is a difficult task. Among the most helpful in sorting it out is Herbert Richardson. He suggests, “American Christians tend to have an Old Testament type of Christianity” (1974:172). From the founding of the United States, there has been a sense that this was a new “Promised Land” and that the Europeans coming over to occupy it were a “chosen people.” Richardson points out that the question seems to be “If Israel has done this, why can't America?” (172).

From within this “Israelite theology,” one of the major theological assumptions of the patriotic church is that God is on “our” side. Now this idea by itself is not problematic in the least way, but is in fact supported in Paul's letter to the Romans: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (NRSV 1989:1300). The point where potential danger enters is in the interpretation of “us.” In the bulletin insert referenced above, it was in relationship to “our” United States military. President Bush uses “us” to describe the

United States in comparison to the generalized “other”—the evil Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein. In fact, President Bush used this same passage in Romans in reference to the United States’ war on terrorism.

This is carried through in patriotic songs often sung with pride in the church, such as the fourth verse of the Star-Spangled Banner:

Blest with victory and peace, may the heaven-rescued land  
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.  
Then conquer we must, for *our* cause it is just,  
And this be *our* motto: “In God is *our* trust.”  
And the Star-Spangled Banner forever shall wave  
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave! (qtd. in Smith 2002:41)

The word “our” (in italics here for emphasis) clearly means the United States, which is a “heaven-rescued land” specially created and preserved by God.

The problem with connecting the “us” in Romans with the “us” in patriotic rhetoric and songs is that the objects to which the pronoun refers are completely different. In Romans, Paul is addressing the community of believers in Jesus Christ, not the nation-state. In fact, nowhere in the New Testament is the nation-state blessed by God or said to be on God’s side. Rather, Jesus assured the Samaritan woman that the time has come when worship of God is not concerned with geographical location, but spirit and truth (NRSV 1998:1239). The days of God working through a particular “chosen” nation-state (i.e. Israel) were finished. As Colossians says, “In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” (1344).

Even in the Old Testament, where it seems clear that God was on the “side” of Israel, they were not exempt from His judgment or withdrawal of protection. So even if civil religion is referring to Old Testament “chosen people” scriptures, I agree with



historian Kenneth Woodward: “. . . the danger of invoking God for any political or military purpose is the presumption that he is on our side. The lesson of history is that no individual or nation is exempt from Divine judgment” (2003:29).

The fact is, even though this is dangerous, it is expected from civil religion. It is part of the plausibility structure to believe and proclaim that God is on the side of “our” nation. But within the church, where theology should rely on the life of Jesus and the Scriptures, there is no excuse for interpreting possessive pronouns as nations. Abraham Lincoln once said wisely that, rather than assuming God is on our side, “We should pray that we are on God’s side” (MPR 2003).

Similar to the concept of God being on “our” side is the theology of “calling.” Sociologist Max Weber attests to the historic importance of this word, calling it the distinctive societal contribution of Protestant reformers (Wuthnow 2003). President Bush, as well as most other presidents before him, uses this kind of language often. For example, he said long ago that “our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world of justice” (qtd. in Marty 2003:33). Similarly, in his January 2003 State of the Union address, he declared, “We’ve been called to a unique role in human events.” Let me clarify that for now Bush's religious sincerity is not in question, but the danger comes, as Marty explains, with "his evident conviction that he's doing God's will" (2003:32).

As often as President Bush says these things, it is even more common in the church. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ articulates this viewpoint: “God has given this country unlimited resources and manpower and finances. [He] . . . has called America to help bring the blessing of His love and forgiveness to the rest of

the world” (qtd. in Wuthnow 1988:248). Nearly anything can be legitimated if a collective can truly be convinced that they are “called” by a supreme being to a particular action.

One of the perplexing issues related to theology in the patriotic church during this time of war is that the majority of trained theologians oppose the war. From the Pope to the Episcopalians to the United Methodists to nearly everyone but Southern Baptists, church leadership has spoken out against this conflict. At the same time, however, the vast majority of Christians in America are supporting the president and the war.

There are several possible explanations for this. One simple possibility is that people are not listening to clergy, but to the culture. Kraybill and other sociologists call this assimilation. Peter Gomes of Harvard suggests the same: “Most of them under fear and anxiety or just general habits will conform to what the culture requires, not what the faith requires” (MPR 2003). A recent report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life supports this idea, reporting that only 10% of respondents say that religious beliefs have been the most important influence on their view of the war with Iraq. The top influences are rather media, personal experience, and education (Pew 2003).

Another explanation lies in the fact that, while theologians have been trained in the Just War Theory, the average Christian in the pews has not. Thus, when George W. Bush preaches a convincing rhetorical message with religious allusions to an apocalyptic battle between good and evil, the religious churchgoer is drawn in without thinking twice about the theology behind it. Since evangelical Christians so quickly embrace George W. Bush, he is really functioning in the role of priest for both civil religion *and* the church. Thus, people have no need for their own denominational “priests” within the church.

Still another plausible explanation requires looking back to Robert Wuthnow's separation between the "conservative" and "liberal." While most theologically educated clergy move into the more "liberal" approach to civil religion, the majority of people within the church remain in the "conservative" side with its legitimizing myths about calling and purpose.

One final (and appropriately so!) theological tenet that is little talked-about but worth mentioning in this discussion is the evangelical Christian view of the Apocalypse. According to one poll taken around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one in every four Americans believes Jesus will return to earth before they die (Kramnick 2001). This view of the nearness of the end times, along with Tim LaHaye's popular *Left Behind* series (and other Apocalyptic literature and film), can be easily paralleled by Priest/President Bush talking about Saddam Hussein as anti-Christlike in his "evilness" and his part in the "axis of evil." This ideological combination gives U.S. Christians even more fodder for legitimating an all-out war. These ideas are frightening and may sound far-fetched. I pray that this is so.

## Conclusion

It seems appropriate at the end of this journey to revisit Robert Bellah. As with many sociological problems, much of the struggle of civil religion and patriotic Christianity relates to power—politicians looking to religion and the church to increase their power (militarily, economically, politically, etc.), the church looking for power within the structures of government, and everyone seemingly looking for power from God. Ever the functionalist, Bellah states:

Power in itself is not bad. The question is, What kind of power? Careful power is moderate and restrained, always thoughtful of consequences, always concerned that it nurture, not destroy. The Christian tradition is rooted in the idea that God in Christ is the very exemplum of careful power (2003:25).

He proceeds later in the same article to argue that our greatest need is moderation.

Further, “Our greatest danger, in our present moralistic and belligerent mood, is taking on responsibilities we cannot and will not fulfill” (24-25).

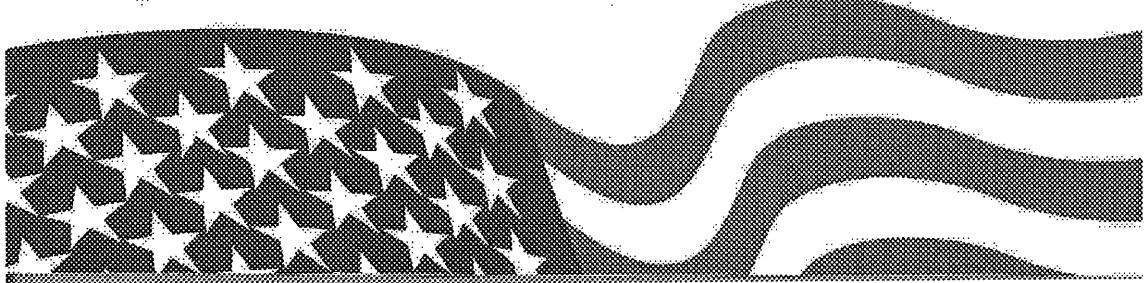
While this is an important thought, I think there are even greater dangers for those in the church. Namely, we are in danger of losing sight of the central Biblical message given in the Old Testament and emphasized again by Jesus—that our allegiance is to God above all else: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (NRSV 1998:162-163). We are also seriously in danger of injuring neighbors and enemies that we are commanded to love.

The congregations described in my introduction, as well as others with flags or United States propaganda, are earnestly seeking to follow God as best they can. This does not excuse dangerous theology or behavior; we are all on the journey, and challenging one another in love and with humility is a valuable part of that process.

Religion—in this society Christianity in particular—has extraordinary power. We must exercise extreme caution when wielding this power behind rulers, rhetoric, and wars.

**Appendix A:**  
Images of the Patriotic Church

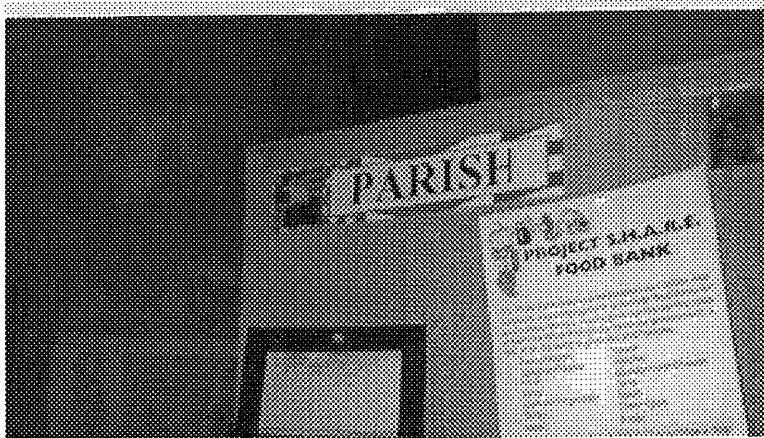
# POWER OF PRIDE



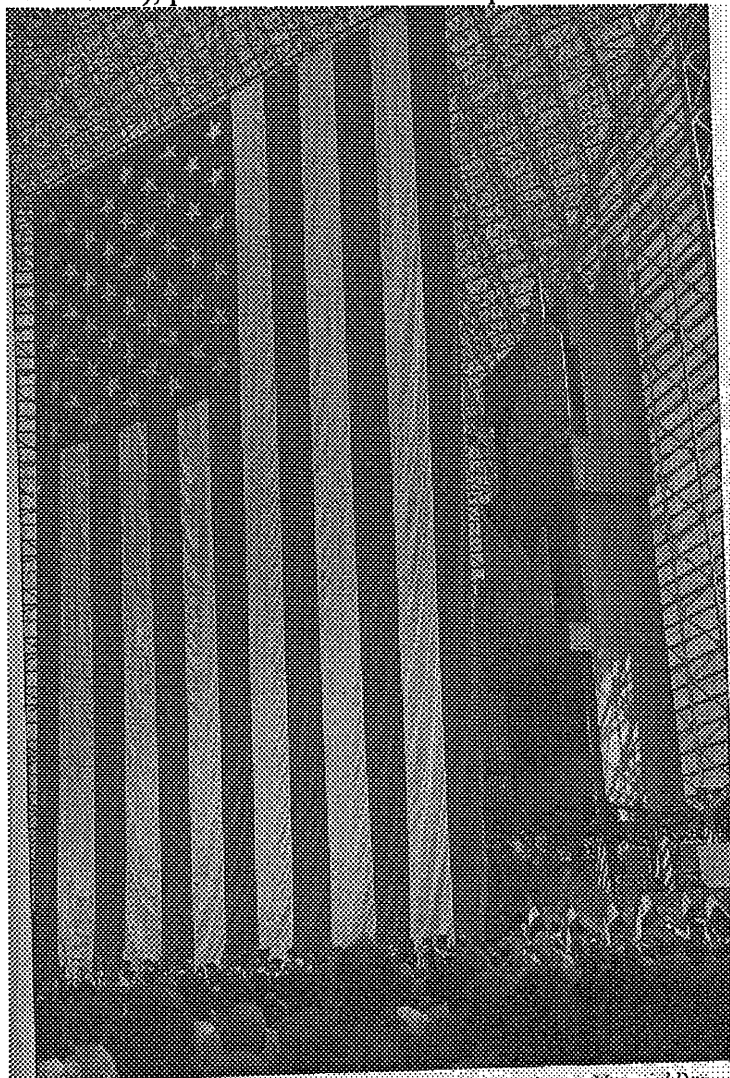
These bumper stickers are being distributed at Lighthouse Community Church in York, Pennsylvania. This symbol illustrates the thesis of this paper perhaps more than any other: there is indeed tremendous power in church pride and patriotism. What is this power designed to accomplish?



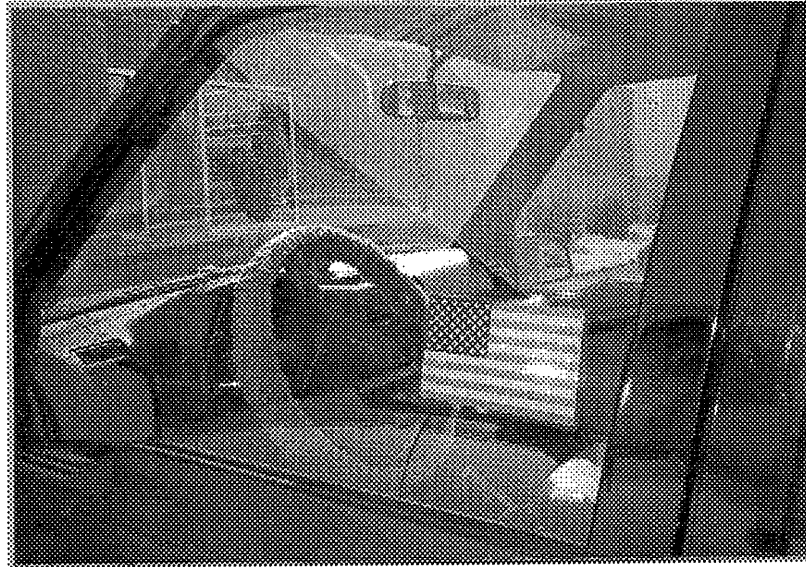
Signs like this one are common in front of churches today. A united stand is undeniably powerful. What are we standing united behind?



From a small-town parish in Pennsylvania to the Crystal Cathedral in California (Penner 1992:371), patriotism is an assumed part of church life.



*One of the world's largest flags raised at the Crystal Cathedral every Memorial Day. The flag is approximately fifty-five feet wide by eighty feet high.*

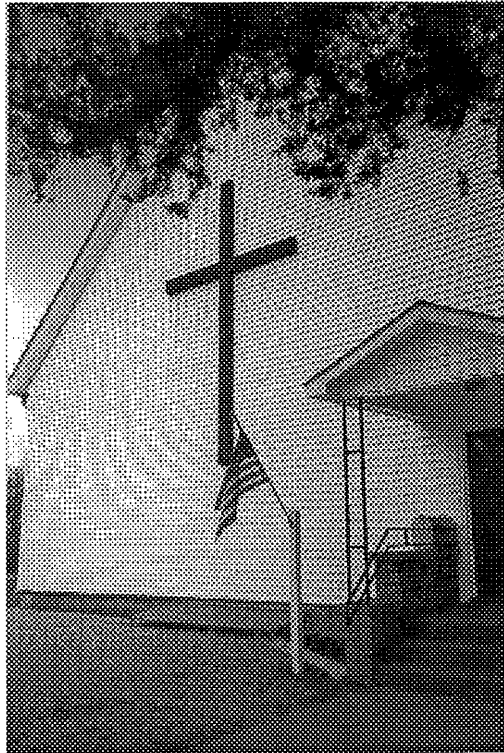


This juxtaposition of the cross and the flag are natural for many U.S. Christians.

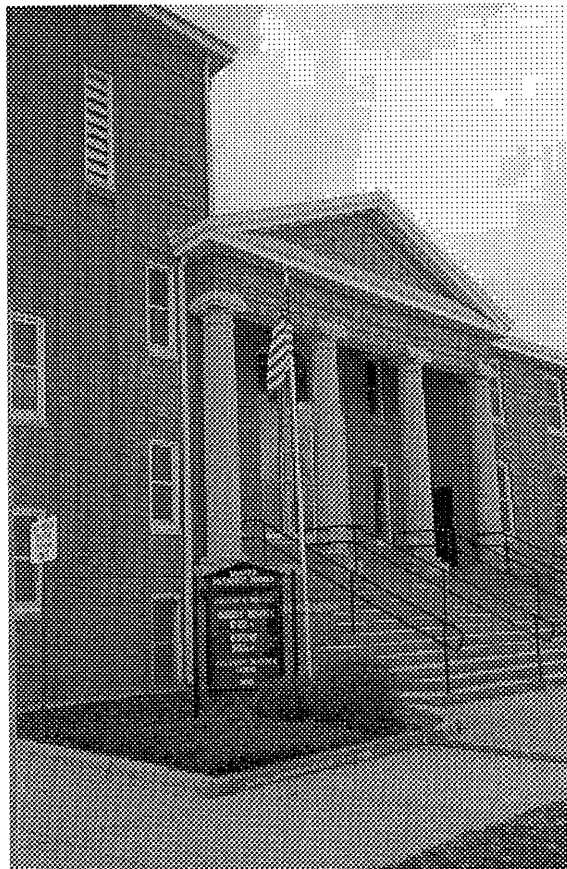


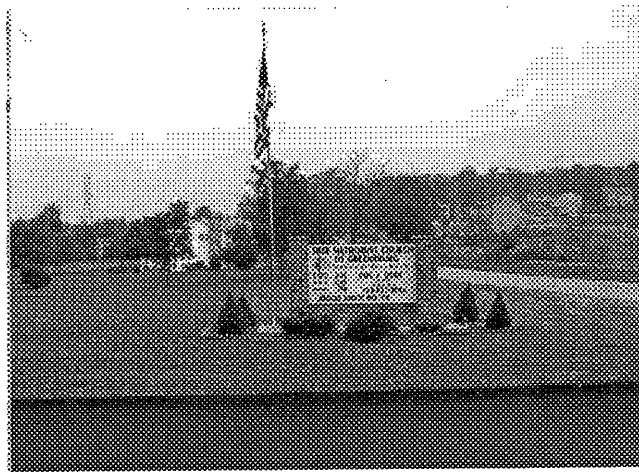
A recent phone survey of churches in central Pennsylvania revealed that 79% of churches have United States flags either in the sanctuary, outside the church, or both places. Almost all have been flying since the churches' beginnings, demonstrating the deeply rooted nature of patriotic Christianity in the U.S.



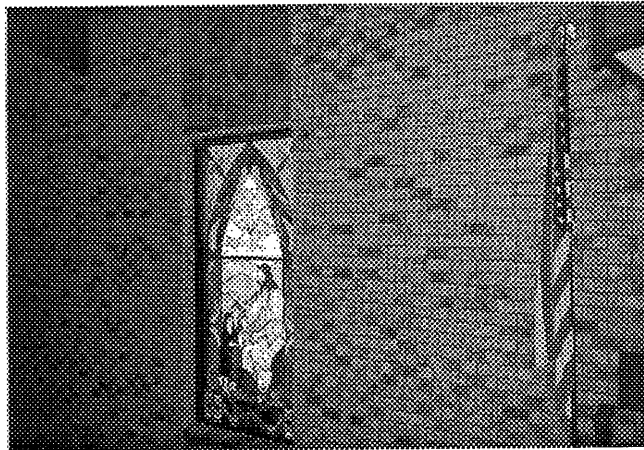


These two images are taken from churches in Downs, Kansas. Patriotic symbols with churches are especially common in many small towns in the center of the Evangelical "Bible Belt."

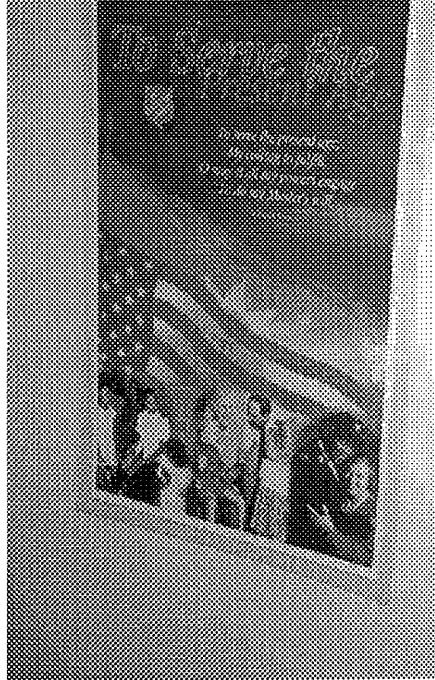




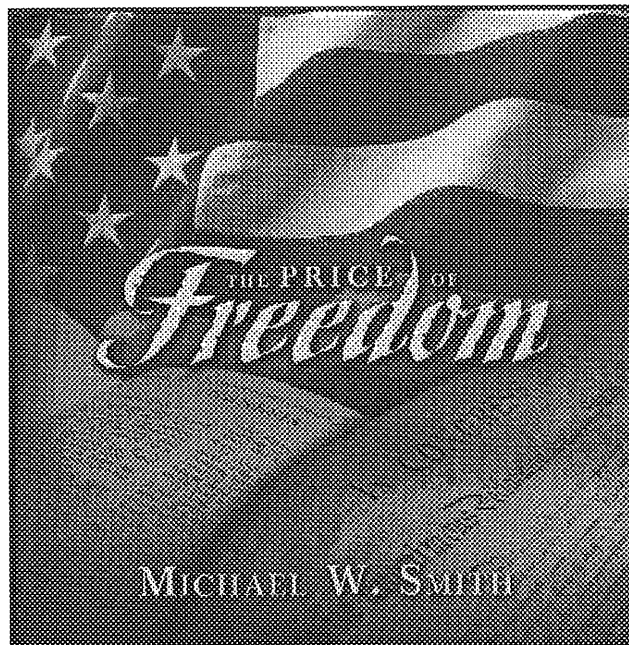
This church (the one mentioned in the introduction with the “God bless America” banners in the front of the sanctuary) introduces itself to the community with a flag next to the sign.



Does Jesus have special concern for American children? What kind of theology does this photograph represent?



"To serve the present age,  
My calling to fulfill,  
O may it all my powers engage  
To do my Master's will."  
-Charles Wesley



Christian contemporary music is a demonstration of U.S. church patriotism. Some of the most famous Christian artists, like Michael W. Smith, have spent considerable time spreading patriotic messages.

The God Bless America pin is 11.5mm x 20.5mm, available in 14KY, 14KW and 10KY. *Photo enlarged to show detail.*

**God Bless America**

☐ 14K yellow...\$80.01

☐ 14K white.....\$83.01

☐ 10K yellow...\$65.22

The One Nation Under God pin is 11.5mm x 20.5mm, available in 14KY, 14KW and 10KY. *Photo enlarged to show detail.*

**One Nation Under God**

☐ 14K yellow...\$73.41

☐ 14K white.....\$76.41

☐ 10K yellow...\$59.70

☐  
Wednesday April 2, 2003

***Today's Psalm:***

I will extol thee, my God, O king; and I will bless thy name for ever and ever. Every day will I bless thee; and I will praise thy name for ever and ever.

Psalm 145:1,2 / KJV

Put this Psalm on your site

Naturally, U.S. Capitalism has also run to cash in on religious patriotism. On this web site, [www.patriotic-jewelry.com](http://www.patriotic-jewelry.com), people can purchase patriotism and have some religious devotion at no extra charge.

In Central Pennsylvania, no Christian bookstore is found without American flags or other patriotic merchandise.

## **Appendix B: Church Rhetoric**

### **Mass e-mail included with church bulletin on February 16, 2003:**

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

Subject: PRAY BEFORE IT STARTS

A torch has been lit today to be passed along to your e-mail friends . . . asking them to pass it along . . . and along . . . and along. We can do something about the threat of war; both in Iraq and with terrorists. In the Old Testament, God's armies were always led by the priests. When the waters parted in the Jordan, it was the priests' feet which first hit the turbulent river. In the New Testament, Christians are also referred to as priests . . . all Christians.

We must, therefore, go in first.

As the possibility of war approaches with Hussein and Iraq, we are asking the priests to step in first . . . ahead of our military. Let us be setting up camp for our soldiers' entrance into the conflict. How? By prayer. Let us be sending in "prayer missiles," "cruise and scud prayers" to target enemy plans. "Patriot prayers" to shoot down incoming threats.

We should be praying for two things: (1) that the enemy leaders become confused, disoriented, and distrustful of each other; that their entire system of attack fall apart, and (2) that in God's wildest ways, these enemies would become aware of His deep love for them and the war Jesus has already fought for them, personally, on the cross. God had Gideon reduce his army from 32,000 to 300 men. He then equipped them with nothing but trumpets, pitchers, and torches. What an odd combination to fight off well-armed soldiers. When Gideon gave the command, the Bible says the enemy fled crying and turned on each other . . . all because God messed with enemy plans.

Prayers were started for this about a month ago. On CNN last weekend a report came out that although Hussein has nothing to lose, his generals do.

Is confusion beginning to develop? Please pray for God to set the stage for defeat of all those who intend to do harm. When our men and women of uniform arrive on the scene, may they be surprised at how God had camp set up before they ever got there.

Would you please do two things? (1) pray, and (2) pass this along to those you know will pray. May we build an e-mail army of over a million in force . . . beginning with you.

**Comment on News and Issues by R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary)**

**March 21, 2003**

***Prayer for Troops and President***

The day of decision has come, and thousands of brave Americans are fighting on the fields of battle in Iraq, and in the skies over that mournful nation. For the American people, this is another reminder that freedom is costly—and liberty must always be defended against its enemies.

For the Iraqi people, this is the promise of liberation from a tyrannical dictator. As President Bush told the Iraqi people, this military campaign is “directed against the lawless men who rule your country, and not against you.”

For all of us, this is a call to prayer. We must pray for the safety and success of our brave men and women in uniform. We must pray for our President, who as Commander in Chief bears such a monumental burden of leadership and responsibility. And we must pray for the Iraqi people, that civilians would be protected and taste the fruit of liberty.

***Onset of Military Action in Iraq***

President Bush has shown remarkable courage and moral clarity in insisting that the dictator of Iraq must be removed. “It is too late for Saddam Hussein to remain in power,” the President declared—and now we know just how serious he was.

The President’s doctrine of preemptive military action makes moral sense in this post-9/11 world, and his moral vision reminds us of other presidents tested by war. Franklin D. Roosevelt once remarked, “When you see a rattlesnake poised to strike, you do not wait until he has struck before you crush him.” Those who oppose this military action must explain why they would leave the rattlesnake in position to strike.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who as Supreme Commander led the allies to victory in Europe in World War II, stated the case plainly: “In war there is no substitute for victory.” Let us pray for that this military campaign will be a victory for world peace.

[http://www.sbts.edu/mohler/ThoughtsRead.php?article=03\\_21\\_2003](http://www.sbts.edu/mohler/ThoughtsRead.php?article=03_21_2003)

**America Again (<http://members.aol.com/RUCreated/AmericaA.html>)**

George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, First Chief Justice John Jay, Names synonymous with the spirit of our country, founding fathers of the U.S.A.

Over 200 years ago they shook off the chains of tyranny from Great Britain by divine call. Citing 27 biblical violations they wrote the Declaration of Independence with liberty and justice for all.

But something happened since Jefferson called the Bible the cornerstone for American liberty then put it in our schools as a light.  
Or since "Give me liberty or give me death", Patrick Henry said our country was founded on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We eliminated God from the equation of American life, thus eliminating the reason this nation first began.  
From beyond the grave I hear the voices of our founding fathers plead, you need God in America again.

Of the 55 men who formed the Constitution, 52 of them were active members of their church. Founding fathers like Noah Webster who wrote the first dictionary, could literally quote the Bible, chapter and verse.

James Madison said, "We've staked our future on our ability to follow the Ten Commandments with all our heart."  
These men believed you couldn't even call yourself an American if you subvert the Word of God.

In his farewell address, Washington said, "You can't have National morality apart from religious principle,"  
And it's true 'cause right now we have nearly 150,000 kids carrying guns to these war zones we call public schools.

In the '40's and '50's student problems were chewing gum and talking.  
In the '90's, rape and murder are the trend.  
The only way this nation can even hope to last this decade is put God in America again.

The only hope for America is Jesus, the only hope for our country is Him.  
If we repent of our ways, stand firm and say, we need God in America again.

Abe Lincoln said, "The philosophy of the schoolroom of one generation, will be the philosophy of government in the next."  
So when you eliminate the Word of God from the classroom and politics, you eliminate the nation that Word protects.  
America is now number one in teen pregnancy and violent crime, number one in illiteracy, drug use, and divorce. Everyday a new holocaust of 5,000 unborn die, while pornography floods our streets like open sewers.  
America's dead and dying hand is on the threshold of the Church, while the spirit of Sodom and Gomorrah vex us all.  
When it gets to the point where people would rather come out of the closet than clean it, it's the sign that the judgment of God is gonna fall.

If there's ever been a time to rise up Church, it's now and as the blood bought saints of the living God proclaim,  
That it's time to sound the alarm from the Church house to the White House and say, "We want God in America again."

I believe it's time for America to stand up and proclaim, that one nation under God is our demand,  
And send this evil lifestyle back to Satan where it came from, and let the Word of God revive our dying land.

For Jesus Christ is coming back again in all His glory and every eye shall see Him on that day.  
That's why a new anointing of God's power's coming on us to boldly tell the world you must be saved.

Because astrology won't save you, your horoscope won't save you, the Bible says these things are all a farce.

If you're born again you don't need to look to the stars for your answers, 'cause you can look to the very One who made those stars.

History tells us time and time again, to live like there's no God makes you a fool.  
If you want to see kids live right, stop handing out condoms and start handing out the Word of God in schools.

The only hope for America is Jesus, the only hope for our country is Him.  
If we repent of our ways, stand firm and say, We need God in America again.

We need God in America, God in America, God in America again.

### **The Battle Hymn of the Republic (<http://www.contemplator.com/folk2/battle.html>)**

Mine eyes have seen the glory  
Of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage  
Where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning  
Of His terrible swift sword;  
His truth is marching on.  
*Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!*  
*Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!*  
*Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!*  
*His truth is marching on.*  
I have seen Him in the watchfires  
Of a hundred circling camps  
They have builded Him an altar  
In the evening dews and damps;  
I can read His righteous sentence  
By the dim and flaring lamps;  
His day is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies  
Christ was born across the sea,  
With a glory in His bosom  
That transfigures you and me;  
As He died to make men holy,  
Let us die to make men free;  
While God is marching on.



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